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THE TABLE CONSIDERED AS AN OBJECT OF ART.

BY

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In the department of Furniture, there is no one article which stands in such intimate relation to civilised life as the Table. Sofas, chairs and cupboards, beds and chests have a more exclusive and self-dependent importance; the Table, on the contrary, is in its general form the central point of the family and social life. Where the intimate relations of family life and social intercourse are unknown, as among the Asiatics, the table loses its importance, and is reduced to the narrowest dimensions: where those relations prevail it takes a greater proportion, and gains in importance in regard to its artistic execution. But it is not only through this its general relation to civilised life, but through its various forms and modifications that the table is important as an article of furniture, nor can any other object boast such a richness and variety of form. In its simplest shape the table consists of two elements, the slab and its supports, having for their exterior form different and appropriate laws as fundamental principles for each, laws which have manifested themselves differently according to the artistic notions of different epochs; and thus it is that the table more than any other article of furniture shows the varying spirit of the times and the characteristics of the tendencies of art which prevailed in those several times.

If, in tracing the development of this piece of furniture, we separate the supports from the slab, we must necessarily begin with the tables of the Romans. From the Greeks very few examples are known to us, and these

from paintings on vases and of such moderate dimensions that they may be left out of the question, and the more so as their forms are continued among the Romans. Writings and paintings speak of and exhibit a multitude of tables which were in use among the Romans: there were the little round tables with one leg, the foot of which was of ivory; the little three legged tables of bronze; the four legged tables with straight pillar-like legs often fluted (No. 1) with claws for the feet; small ornamental dining tables placed one by one before each guest; sideboards for the display of costly vessels and plate, hence called *mensæ vasariæ*; money changers' tables and those destined for divine service; all these however must yield to the marble tables found in Pompeii, which in point of artistic execution are of universal and prominent importance. As the Italian Greeks are always distinguished by their acquaintance with nature, the feet (No. 2) are shaped like lions' legs and claws, supporting in a lying posture the slab above; the head which is placed over the thigh finishes the support, but does not directly come in contact with the slab, because as in nature, so in art, the head is not used as a supporting, but a crowning and supported member. This table is indeed an unsurpassable example of the style in which natural animal-motives may be artistically treated; of the limits within which the artist should confine himself in his imitation of nature, without becoming a mere copyist of her forms; how he may justify his claim to

the name of artist by using these animal figures as subordinate to higher technical uses; and lastly, how the plant-forms &c., may be harmoniously combined with them as simple decorations without any detracting from their own individuality of style.

From the tables of the Romans, which if of wood, were small and unimportant, if of bronze, were shaped in the well known form of the tripod, we must pass, for want of existing examples, to the Romanesque period. But the tables of this time, as they are shown by way of examples, in the Hortus deliciarum of Honved in Landsberg, were simple and unornamented, with the plain feet concealed by a cover fastened round the edge of the slab. We have something better in the Gothic period, which has not only bequeathed to us a number of most excellently preserved examples, but by its special preference of wood, has bestowed particular attention on the feet and their artistic configuration. In general we may distinguish four kinds; the form of St. Andrew's cross, the four straight feet standing free, the panelled supports, and lastly the architectonically treated with a single foot to round and polygonal slabs. The first kind is again diversely constructed, being either more or less richly appointed according as the framework was firmly connected with the upper part, or was rather intended to be drawn out to some length to serve as a dining table for larger parties. So too, the freestanding supports were more or less decorated according to the position of the owner, with carved or turned ornaments, and usually covered here and there with colours. The agreeable impression which these shapes still produce, depends especially on their solidity, firmness and stability, both in the genuine natural simplicity of the material, and in its adaptation to the form. Of more artistic importance are the panelled supports and the single foot. The first were in earlier times less architectonically treated than in later, and their configuration and decoration were limited to massive panelled side-pieces, joined by traverses, with surface ornaments on coloured ground. In the centre however, where these supports were neither connected with the slab nor the cross-bar, their ornaments were of a more decorative character, frequently freely pierced, forming a lattice work covered with tracery. The disproportionate predominance of decorative features over the constructional forms which characterised the later Gothic period is particularly found in the supports of the one footed tables, which were not only surcharged with an exuberance of such details, but disfigured by them in an illegitimate and irrational manner (4).

In the configuration of the Renaissance furniture the best known artists were Ducerceau and his contemporary Bredeman. To them we are indebted for a number of most beautiful and graceful examples which served for models for the furniture makers of their time. In their designs we perceive three kinds of treatment, two of which are derived from the antique and the preceding Gothic period, but the third is an entirely original and independent creation. To the antique belong the use of the Sphinx and other figures which were appropriated

to the more richly appointed tables, and may be called free imitations of similar Romish marble shapes with the natural modifications which distinguish wood from stone (5). Of the same kind as the above named Gothic supports are designs, like No. 6, in which the decoration is necessarily conceived and disposed in a new spirit. The central part, which at an earlier period was more or less pierced, is here supplied with niches and flanked right and left by pilasters. This architectonic motive then finds its most beautiful and natural expression in the baluster and pillar-like foot, shown in 7 and 8. The cornice-like parts above them are not a direct imitation of those in architectonic monuments, but they resemble them sufficiently to form an artistic connexion between the supporting and supported parts, viz. the legs and slab, and to give them a unity of appearance. To these forms of the Renaissance, we may add those legs turned by the lathe, whose peculiarity, when compared with similar forms of earlier times, consists in a thick bulbed part just below the slab, which commands the other smaller projections and divides the foot according to fixed rules of proportion.

Throughout the whole period of the Renaissance, wood had a decided influence over the shape of the legs of tables, and though they were sometimes ornamented with inlaid work these supports were principally, and always in outward appearance, of wood. In the period called Louis XIV., this was all changed, and the alteration proved fatal to the whole furniture trade. The inflated magnificence of that period was no longer content with the simple and natural shapes of the past, but trimmed them up with glaring additions to produce effect, so that the legs of tables were rarely to be seen without some extraneous heavy ornaments of gilt bronze, which at first were, correctly enough, applied only to the connecting and finishing pieces, but at a later period were met with in every part (9). By means of such decorations, and strengthening by metal-settings, the circumference of the wooden supports could be diminished, and thus instead of the bulky legs of the side-boards, appeared a host of slender ones, with a slight resemblance to antique models, which (as in No. 10) perform their supporting function in graceful lines. But in the time immediately subsequent, during the reign of Louis XV, these forms were distorted into most irrational shapes. The feet of the tables with all their Rococo decorations despise every trace of organic articulation and development, being composed like stucco ornaments and porcelain, of twisted and spiral pieces entirely destitute of any logical foundation and absolutely contradictory to the qualities of wood and supporters (11). Still this indissoluble discord between the material, the purpose and the form, was somewhat mitigated by gilding the whole and giving to the wood the appearance of metal. But even in such a dress, apart from its intrinsic untruthfulness, an effect is produced only by the bizarrerie of form and the exquisite workmanship, and no one single healthy element, capable of a continued existence can be discovered in such forms. Even the turned feet which still remained in

esteem and fashion in spite of those which were decorated with plastic ornaments, participated in the giddy maze of curved, broken and distorted lines, by exchanging their simple shapes for complicated ones, and affecting more particularly the spiral forms.

The sober time of Louis XVI put an end indeed to these extravagancies, but went itself into another and still worse extreme. The antique discoveries of that period, as they were in agreement with the efforts after natural simplicity were worked up in preference to all else for the wants of the moment: but the time had become so unartistic, so sickly and so unproductive of anything original, that even the antique forms which might have been directly employed, were crippled and spoilt, not to mention the new specimens which were derived from such examples. All that was thought of was outward form; as to a deeper search into the legitimate effect and connection between material and technic, or any study of the significance of colour &c., this was so much the less attended to, as for fifty years past such questions had no longer been canvassed. And colour was just the sore point in those sickly times. Every thing was colourless; all was white and grey, and the stuccomania of the foregoing period had covered every thing which used to be executed in a different material and decorated with colour, with stucco-imitation of marble. So even the feet of the tables had a coating of marble, and as they were most frequently executed after Roman or pseudo-roman bronze models, their meagreness and meanness contrasted all the more with this imitation of marble (12). If in earlier times wood was treated like bronze and metal, it was at least covered and gilded; now it was equally treated like metal, but given the appearance of marble, so that material, colour and form might be said to lie to one another.

Such was the ground on which the restoration had to build, after the empire had attenuated to the last degree the forms of Louis XVI, awaking out of their sleep first of all, the three periods just referred to. But all their productions were but stillborn children, though foreign countries, Germany before all, have partly adopted them and do so still. If we only compare the furniture patterns offered to us in French publications for thirty years with the original works of the time of the three Louis, we cannot possibly avoid the persuasion, that by its long standing and frequent réchauffé, the dish has gained no new and nourishing qualities.

If in these modern days we have turned aside from this path, it is certainly not to our loss, and if we are now able successfully and honorably to emulate those periods which, on account of their attention to the material, technic and purpose of their productions and their artistic expression, may be set forth as models for the artist, this is owing before all else to an intelligent appreciation of the motives of the antique, and the judicious course opened up by Bredeman de Vriese.

From the perishable nature of the material, it is self evident that beyond a certain time there can remain to us no specimens of wooden tables; but that

from an early period great attention was paid to them and their artistic decoration, we know both from old descriptions and from the time out of mind traditions of the Asiatics. We learn, for example, that before the time of the Empire in Rome there was a great display of wealth in tables of rare woods, and that Cicero, though he was neither particularly wealthy, nor, as his oration against Verres shows, any great connoisseur in art, gave for one table a million sesterces, upwards of £ 1000 sterling. When, however, mention is made of inlaid tables in this period, it is generally to be understood that they were productions of oriental art, such as we still see among the civilised people of the East. Their treatment is still unaltered, and consists in the insertion of ivory, mother of pearl, tortoise-shell &c., in geometrical patterns.

Besides this method of treating the surface of the table, there is another oriental principle which consists in the covering and clothing it with a thin leaf of metal, a practice which has repeatedly met with a favorable reception in the East. Among these must be mentioned the gold and silver tables named in the will of Charlemagne on whose surfaces were designed plans of the cities of Rome and Constantinople, and a map of the world, and especially the altar tables covered with thin gold and silver which are so often spoken of in the early middle ages, and which, in miniature, so called portative altars, have remained to our own times. We will only mention one, which is to be seen in the chapel of the Royal palace in Munich, and has been lately fully described.

The ordinary tables, however, as they are to be seen in representations of entertainments, are covered with coloured or woven cloths and we may conclude from this, that their surfaces were without ornaments.

With the fifteenth century came a change, and the slabs were ornamented with rich intarsia. Though this was in the first place an Italian practice, it soon obtained such approbation in Germany that in the second half of the sixteenth century, tables with such inlaid decorations were described as of German style, *à façon allemande*. If this intarsia decoration introduced, and was the cause of the veneering which was generally used somewhat later, our researches hitherto have not satisfied us, but it is certain that, from the sixteenth century these two styles of decoration go hand in hand. At first they were lines and surfaces designed to contrast in colour in the slab, then the lines were extended as borders and the surfaces between them distributed into a central space with connecting parts between it and the border, so that at last even pictures and perspective views were represented on them. Italy was the first to adopt this, where an extraordinary fluency of technic, and at the same time new discoveries with regard to the colouring and burning of the wood presented to the intarsia-worker so charming a means of decoration that he even dared to enter into competition with the painter. How this succeeded in many instances, may be seen from several still extant specimens, and however we may blame and deplore such attempts as errors in point of taste and legitimate art, they display a superiority in point of

technic which cannot but excite our highest admiration. We have here moreover a proof how a too great technical refinement is apt to lead astray, and how there are certain limits to be kept *quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum*. The old intarsia-workers made use of the points which resulted from the work of the saw, and which manifested themselves at the intersections of the pieces, as framing lines for the designs, and were so far from concealing them that they mixed dark coloured size to make them more conspicuous. By this means the different kinds of wood stood out in contrast from one another and the design became more clear and distinct. Afterwards, these joints were avoided by not cutting them perpendicularly to the surface, but obliquely, and then on putting them together the inlaid parts were pressed into the others and polished to one level, making the joint almost imperceptible. By this technical artifice the joint, which was looked upon as a blot, was diminished or avoided, but by the same means the law was neglected which had protected and regulated the natural beauty of the mosaic.

Besides this intarsia of wood, ivory was much used, especially for ebony tables, the dark colour of which was tempered by the creamy tone of the insertions, while to mitigate the contrast between the two opposite colours, the ivory was engraved with dark coloured lines. Sometimes these insertions in ebony were applied to wood of a different colour so that an intermediate tone was obtained between the ebony and ivory, by which the picturesque effect was much increased.

The predilection in favour of coloured insertions was even carried over into marble tables and displayed itself in two styles of decoration, the so-called Florentine mosaic and the scagliola, both of which, as far as they confined themselves to geometrical and arabesque ornaments, often produced real masterpieces of technic and beauty, but at a later period entered on the same path, especially in coloured stucco decoration, which we have already spoken of with regard to the wood intarsia.

Under Louis the fourteenth, the liking for those metallic additions which we have before had occasion to notice for the feet, left also some traces in the slab, and though the silver tables of which historians make mention found their way to the smelting-pot, we have still some drawings, those of Daniel Marot for example, which give us a sufficiently correct idea of this splendid style of decoration, a style which André Charles Boulle took up with such success that it was called by his name, inlaying metal or tortoiseshell, so as to avoid the unpleasant contrast which resulted from engraving the metal itself, and thus mitigating its harsh effect. Of these Boulleworks, most beautiful specimens of which are still to be found in our museums, the following period under

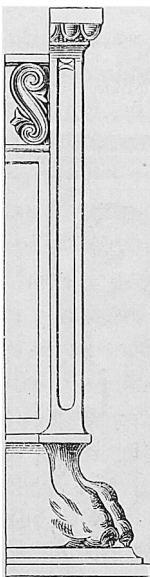
Louis the fifteenth made great use, but with two peculiarities which are an evidence of the special influence of the rococo: namely the variously curved form of the slab and the preference for marble, either real or imitated. Under Louis the fourteenth the table was of regular shape, rectangular, oval or round, but now they were so shaped that strictly geometrical forms almost disappeared entirely and all possible curves came up in their stead. The marble slabs indeed were a necessary consequence of the universal extension of the stucco-mania, and came now gradually more and more into almost exclusive acceptance, so much so indeed, that not only the frames of doors and windows, but even whole doors, window frames and shutters appear in that guise. It was not until the reign of Louis the sixteenth that this practice reached its zenith, while the wood and metal insertions were still in use with it, nor indeed did it put aside another favorite style of decoration, namely the use of slabs of painted porcelain. The whiteness of this material and the blended colours of the painting upon it, together with a certain character of prettiness, tenderness and delicacy, harmonised well with the spirit of this time, and it is only owing to its high price that the imitation of marble slabs retained its preeminence.

As with the feet, so with the slab of the table, the productions of the present century are chiefly imitations of former times: where there is any originality, it is less the result of an intelligent conception of the natural requirements of the slab, that it may not be quite useless, than of new inventions, which in common with many of our other efforts at reform in the realm of art industry are a proof that the natural laws of style are still in many instances slumbering with the Sleeping Beauty of fabledom.

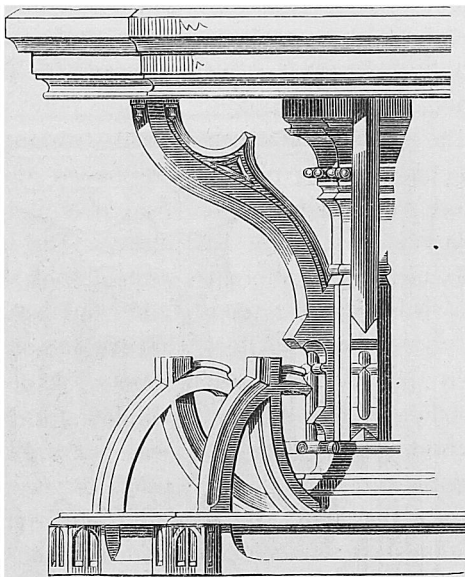
In some places, as in France, the taste for a rich ornamentation of the table with flowers has not died out: but rich as are the colours and perfect as is the painting, such decorations are objectionable when, fitted out with all the artistical apparatus of light and shade, they are employed as surface ornaments: the French indeed compose them out of different kinds of wood, by which means the table does not become absolutely unserviceable. We must however repeat against such ornamentation the remarks on its impropriety which we have already made where speaking of similar inlaid works: for of what importance can be the decoration of a table, which in opposition to all conventional requirements makes it useless for service, as is the case with painted slabs. Attempts have indeed been made to render the painting more durable, but a single visit to a Museum, and a merely superficial study of old models will be more attractive than all these inventions, and direct the student to the right path of artistic embellishment.



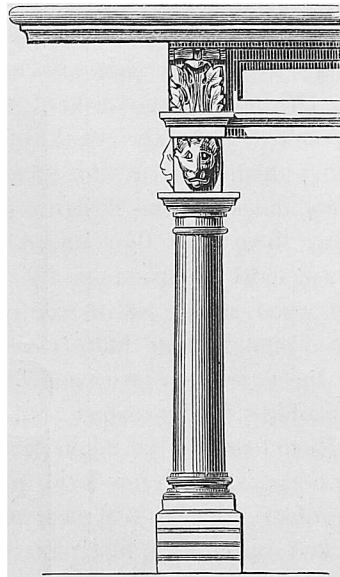
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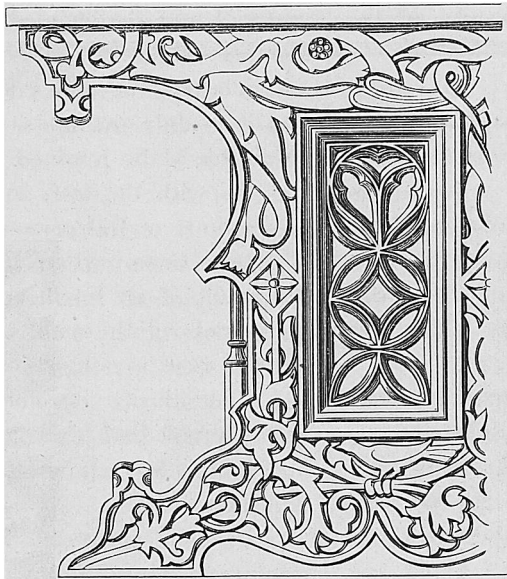
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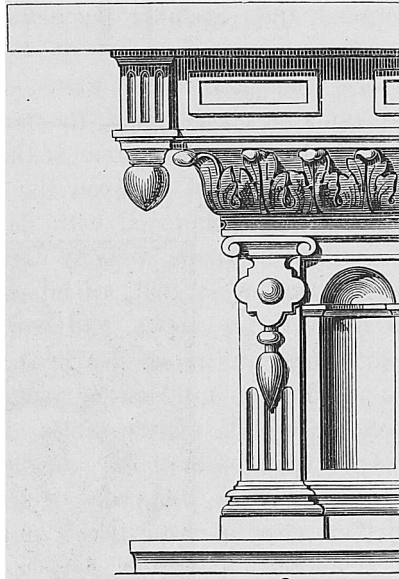
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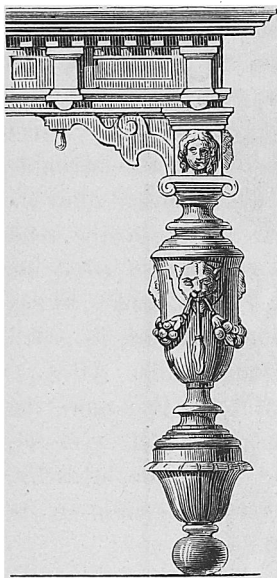
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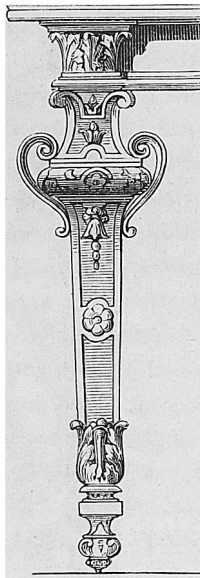
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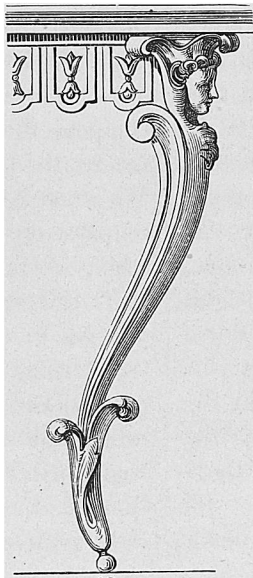
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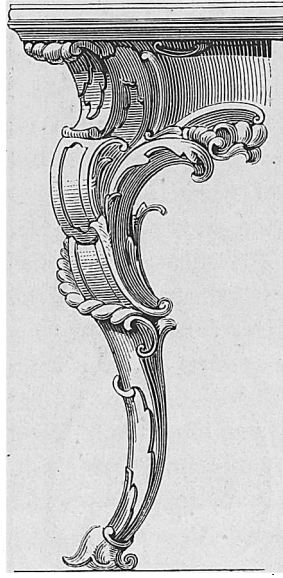
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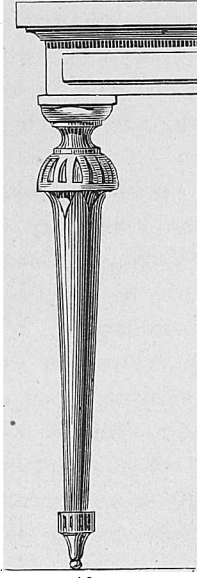
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